


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# In the shadow of the BRI: The figurative infrastructures of Chinese religion along the Maritime Silk Road

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## Abstract

In Singkawang, West Kalimantan, the local Chinese Indonesian community is currently engaged in a major Chinese religious revival centring around inter-ethnic spirit-medium practices. At the centre of this revival are processes of recreating Chinese Indonesian identities in relation to both highly localized gods, spirits, and territorially grounded senses of belonging and re-Sinicization processes that relate to transnational circulations of Chinese language education and media circulations within a greater Chinese cultural sphere. As China rises as a global superpower, it is manifesting political and economic hegemony through investments in ambitious infrastructural development projects along the territories within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which runs through Indonesia. Alongside this, members of this socially, culturally, and geographically peripheral diasporic community are realigning themselves symbolically and imaginatively with China as a social-historical force in the world. While the BRI is a multinational, regional infrastructural development programme that consists of both physical infrastructures and corresponding imaginaries of Global China, in this article I develop a case study from the vantage point of what I term the ‘shadow of the BRI’. Existing in this shadow are diasporic Chinese communities with their own networks, connections, and concerns that differ greatly from the state-driven BRI infrastructural development projects. Within this shadow of the BRI, I argue, there is a further shadow—the symbolic infrastructure of Chinese religion, which maintains a figurative connection with China, even when physical connections with China are weak or absent. In this article, I explain how, alongside the material infrastructures of the BRI, the figurative aspects of Chinese religion act as a shadow infrastructure that transports practitioners into a transnational realm of stories, myths, and politics in which divine bureaucrats demonstrate their power (Man. *shen* and *ling*) by interacting with and intervening in peoples’ daily lives. Building on existing scholarship that recognizes that the BRI is not merely a composite of infrastructure projects but also an act of the imagination, in which a specific civilizational imaginary of China’s place in the world is being articulated, this article further argues that for diasporic communities who are reorienting their Chinese identities in relation to these civilizational imaginaries, the figurative infrastructure of Chinese religion remains important, despite being in the shadows, as a hidden source of power and structure. In imperial

times, political and religious infrastructures were representations of each other and deeply intertwined, forming a yin-yang complementarity. At present the infrastructures connected to the Chinese state and its policies and the figurative infrastructure of Chinese religion are unconnected with each other, comprising two completely distinct worlds that complicate the ambivalent connections to China of the Chinese Indonesian community in Singkawang.

**Keywords:** BRI; Chinese Indonesians; Chinese religion; infrastructure

## Introduction

‘I had to build a special shelf for it. I need it up high here on the wall. This is not just any god you know. This is Fa Zhu Gong. He was brought back from China for me especially for my house. We went with our master. I have been three times to the home of Fa Zhu Gong in China,’ Afung explains. He is showing me the small shelf altar where he keeps a statue of Fa Zhu Gong, his patron deity, in the front room of his shop house.

Fa Zhu Gong, whose fierce face is dark black with a long black beard, sits on a golden throne with legs slightly raised, resting on two golden fire wheels. He wears an elaborate ornamental imperial costume, his right hand holds a silver sword raised upwards, his left hand is positioned in a mudra at his heart chakra, and his eyes are wide open, looking directly and piercingly forward.

Afung is a member of the Fab Zhu Kung (FZK) foundation,<sup>1</sup> a spirit-medium centred temple community in Singkawang, West Kalimantan.<sup>2</sup> Led by the temple’s spirit-medium, Liu Ket Peng, members of the FZK temple have made three annual pilgrimages to China to visit the ancestral origin point of their patron deity, bringing statues from Singkawang to China to be activated at Sihudong mountain before being brought back to Singkawang and placed in their home altars, like the one Afung showed me. The details of the ascent of this relatively newly formed FZK temple are exceptional in many ways—the fact that it is a charitable organization that receives instructions directly from the deity through the medium and the emphasis on seeking physical and spiritual connections with China through annual pilgrimages, for example.<sup>3</sup> However, in another sense, there is nothing exceptional about the FZK temple community. The temple is one of hundreds of others in the city of Singkawang, many of which are also led by charismatic spirit-mediums who draw inventively and idiosyncratically from multiple sources of knowledge about Chinese and non-Chinese deities to form unique, efficacious, and temple-specific pantheons.

This article presents a specific argument about the symbolic aspects of being a Chinese religious practitioner in the context of Indonesia in general and Singkawang in particular in relation to the rise of China as a major global economic force in the world, which has specific civilizational imaginings that take the form of massive infrastructure projects, including along the newly imagined MSR. I argue that, for Chinese

<sup>1</sup>Please note that while the standard Mandarin pinyin for the god’s name is Fa Zhu Gong, this temple community uses an irregular spelling which mixes Romanized Hakka and Mandarin pinyin: Fab Zhu Kung (hereafter FZK).

<sup>2</sup>Emily Hertzman, ‘An international turn: Rebuilding Chinese temple networks in Indonesia 20 years after the Suharto era’, *Global Networks*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2023, pp. 616–632.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Indonesians in Singkawang, despite a potential for imagined ethnic affinities and ancestral connections with people and places in China, these affinities are constrained by different national histories in the twentieth century in China and Indonesia, differences in social class and sub-ethnic identities, as well as local cultural norms. Major obstacles exist for Hakka-speaking Chinese Indonesians from Singkawang seeking to identify with and participate in the large China-sponsored infrastructural development projects taking place locally as well as throughout Indonesia. In lieu of this, however, locals have an extensive and highly developed Chinese religious infrastructure that is both material and symbolic. It has remained remarkably intact through eras of repression, distributing and circulating the raw materials that people use to understand and interpret their lives, their moral dilemmas, their health, and the larger forces controlling and animating the universe. This operates as a shadow infrastructure running beneath the more dominant and physically assertive infrastructures developed by the Indonesian state and Chinese bilateral investments.

### China's rise, the BRI, and Chinese diasporic communities

The BRI is not a single orchestrated master plan. Rather, on the ground, it comprises hundreds of infrastructural development projects led by various state and non-state actors and collectives. As a totality, particularly via the richly symbolic names—BRI and MSR—a new civilizational imaginary is being constructed in which the image of China and its place in the world and in relation to other people and nation-states is being redefined.<sup>4</sup> Part of this redefinition is an image of China as a great power, a prosperous nation, a developed economy capable of being a giver (as opposed to a receiver) of aid, and a leader and builder of international networks and monumental infrastructures of global historical importance.<sup>5</sup> While critics and pundits rightfully point out the territorial expansion involved in the BRI and the MSR involves many forms of hard and soft power, and huge monetary, material, and human resource investments,<sup>6</sup> these initiatives are at the same time a way of symbolizing a new moment in China's civilizational development.<sup>7</sup> Through these development processes China is reinscribing itself onto world history.

For diasporic Chinese and Sinophone communities around the world this marks an important moment in which to consider what China's new civilizational imaginary might mean for them and their identities, which are, at least partially, based

<sup>4</sup>David A. Palmer, 'The BRI and religion: Local, transnational and geopolitical imaginations and assemblages'. Presentation for BRINFAITH: Religion and Empire Series, Hong Kong, 5 April 2022; Michael A. Peters, 'The Chinese dream, Belt and Road Initiative and the future of education: A philosophical postscript', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 54, no. 7, 2022, pp. 857–862.

<sup>5</sup>Sokphea Young, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Patron-client and capture in Cambodia', *The Chinese Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2020, pp. 414–434.

<sup>6</sup>Buddhi Prasad Sharma and Raunab Singh Khatri, 'The politics of soft power: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as charm influence in South Asia', *China and the World*, vol. 2, no. 01, 2019, p. 1950002; Tim Winter, 'Geocultural power: China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1376–1399; Khun Eng Kuah, 'China's soft power: Culturalisation along the Belt Road corridors', in *Silk Road to Belt Road: Reinventing the past and shaping the future*, (ed.) Md. Nazrul Islam (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2018), pp. 121–145.

<sup>7</sup>Winter, 'Geocultural power'.

on some shared historic, ancestral, ethnic, and/or linguistic connections. How are diasporic Chinese communities positioning themselves in relation to China's new geographic imaginary? This is a particularly important question to take up in Southeast Asia because it is a BRI priority area, envisioned as the Maritime Silk Road. It is also home to the world's largest and most diverse populations of diasporic Chinese who have centuries of experience in negotiating relationships with mainland China, brokering exchanges between China and Southeast Asian states, and maintaining many kinds of transnational networks, be they business, religious, fraternal, and so on.<sup>8</sup> If we view the BRI as a series of infrastructure projects that collectively communicate and substantiate China's new civilizational and geopolitical imaginary, then we may ask how Chinese Indonesians, specifically, as citizen-subjects of Indonesia, but with long and complicated ancestral connections to China, and forms of Chinese language, culture, and cosmology, may choose to identify with these modern civilizational revivals, practically and symbolically.

The ways that Hakka Chinese Indonesians from Singkawang position themselves, via their mobilities and subjectivities, in relation to circulating ideas and practices about elite cosmopolitan transnational Chinese capitalists reveal a gulf between aspiration and the attainment of goals.<sup>9</sup> When assessing how this community intersects with other Chinese populations overseas, I found that Chinese migration, more so than the migratory patterns of other groups, has been framed in terms of economic aspects, with studies tending to focus on new capitalist classes,<sup>10</sup> middle-income entrepreneurs,<sup>11</sup> and labour migrants respectively.<sup>12</sup> In each case, there is a conflation of Chinese identity with economic concerns, at the expense of focusing on other priorities and experiences of life and mobility. The implications of this conflation go beyond academic articles and research reports; they also enter into generalized characterizations of diasporic Chinese communities.<sup>13</sup> This poses a particular problem for Chinese Indonesians, and particularly the Hakka Chinese Indonesian community

<sup>8</sup>Wang Gungwu, 'Greater China and the Chinese overseas', *The China Quarterly*, no. 136, 1993, pp. 926–948; Leo Suryadinata and Tan Chee Beng, 'Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: Overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas or Southeast Asians?', in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, (ed.) Leo Suryadinata (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 1–32; Mette Thunø, 'Reaching out and incorporating Chinese overseas: The trans-territorial scope of the PRC by the end of the 20th century', *The China Quarterly*, no. 168, 2001, pp. 910–929.

<sup>9</sup>Emily Hertzman, 'Returning to the kampung halaman: Limitations of cosmopolitan transnational aspirations among Hakka Chinese Indonesians overseas', *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2014, pp. 147–164.

<sup>10</sup>David Ley, *Millionaire migrants: Trans-Pacific life lines* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2011); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Johanna L. Waters, 'Transnational family strategies and education in the contemporary Chinese diaspora', *Global Networks*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2005, pp. 359–377.

<sup>12</sup>Antonella Ceccagno, 'New Chinese migrants in Italy', *International Migration*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2003, pp. 187–213; Wing-Chung Ho and Chau-Kiu Cheung, 'Ecological influences on Chinese migrant mothers' integration with Hong Kong', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2011, pp. 31–40; Edwin Lin, 'Big fish in a small pond': Chinese migrant shopkeepers in South Africa', *International Migration Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014, pp. 181–215.

<sup>13</sup>Donald M. Nonini, 'Shifting identities, positioned imaginaries: Transnational traversals and reversals by Malaysian Chinese', in *Ungrounded empires: The cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism*, (eds) Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), pp. 203–227.

in Singkawang, because the ways in which they travel overseas as well as their socio-economic profile at home complicate these various economic categories.<sup>14</sup> This means they are often trying to escape the prevalent (and inaccurate) stereotypes associated with ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (as wealthy, greedy, and clannish) and the paranoid rhetoric of Chinese economic domination that has fuelled those stereotypes.

The image of the highly mobile and quintessentially flexible transnational Chinese capitalist<sup>15</sup> is something that local Chinese populations have to contend with,<sup>16</sup> both in terms of their own mobility and now also with the arrival of different groups of Chinese nationals (be they labourers, engineers, bureaucrats, business people, spokespeople, and so on) who arrive for periods of time to build infrastructure projects in local areas, as part of the BRI. This positioning can be particularly problematic for Chinese Indonesians from Singkawang, because, while they may have some shared ethnic identity and may aspire to the levels of wealth and flexible mobility represented by transnational investors, they are neither inherently nor particularly flexible, adaptable, or capitalistic in their business pursuits or their mobility.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to a worldly cosmopolitan orientation, many Singkawang Chinese Indonesians primarily cultivate persistent and powerful emotional attachments to place-based conceptualizations of home in Singkawang, Indonesia, particularly to the local landscape which is impregnated with sacred and religious elements, including transnationally mobile gods and local Datuk spirits.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the Chinese engineers and financiers who travel to local areas to construct power plants, ports, bridges, dams, highways, and railways, Hakka people from Singkawang are not large-scale capitalist developers nor the natural denizens of a borderless world, as some would portray them.<sup>19</sup> They are peripheral to a variety of current geo-cultural definitions of Chinese and diasporic Chinese identities based on being Chinese Indonesians, being Hakka speakers, having lived in Indonesia for multiple generations, having limited knowledge of Mandarin, and being relatively poor and geographically peripheral. While members of the Hakka Chinese Indonesian community in Singkawang experience these multiple forms of marginality, they must still continuously confront the idea and image of modern Chinese transnational capitalism and the reality of 'rising China' as a social, economic, and political force in the world.

This often involves an internal ambivalence about the role and value of wealth and business, as many locals aspire to be wealthy on a scale large enough to contribute to regional infrastructure development, but few have the material, social, or symbolic resources to practically be a part of that process. The power which comes from national

<sup>14</sup>Emily Hertzman, 'Pulang Kampung (Returning home): Circuits of mobility from a Chinese town in Indonesia', PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2017.

<sup>15</sup>Ley, *Millionaire migrants*; Ong, *Flexible citizenship*.

<sup>16</sup>Donald M. Nonini, *'Getting by': Class and state formation among Chinese in Malaysia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup>Hertzman, 'Returning to the kampung halaman', pp. 147–164.

<sup>18</sup>Hertzman, 'An international turn'. *Datuk*, or *Datok* is a kinship term meaning 'grandfather' in Malay and 'ancestor' in Indonesian. It is also used as an honorific title for people who have achieved a certain status. It also refers to locally deified individuals who are usually of Malay or mixed racial origins or sometimes indigenous Dayak individuals (which are more commonly called *Latok* in Hakka dialect or *Nek* in Indonesian).

<sup>19</sup>Ley, *Millionaire migrants*.

prosperity that is now projected outwards by the BRI is something that locals respect, and are often in awe of. However, they are individually far removed from, and in some cases disappointed about, this as the vagaries of different national and economic development trajectories in Indonesia and China over the twenty-first century have led to vastly differing circumstances and conditions for generating prosperity. Despite lower levels of wealth and socioeconomic status (that could lead to transnationally recognized forms of prestige, power, and cosmopolitanism) local Singkawang Chinese have an elaborate religious infrastructure, which provides spiritual and moral authority at important moments in their lives. This, I argue, is a shadow infrastructure.

### Introducing Singkawang: The city of a thousand temples

Singkawang is unique in Indonesia as the only city with a majority Chinese Indonesian population, giving the entire town a distinct Chinese cultural atmosphere and engendering local politics and social life with a relatively stronger Chinese Indonesian voice and influence. The city was home to Indonesia's first ethnically Chinese mayor (2007–2012), and the current mayor is Indonesia's first female Chinese Indonesian mayor (2017–). In many other cities in Indonesia with sizeable Chinese populations, particularly in Java, Chinese dialects did not survive the Suharto era ban on Chinese language.<sup>20</sup> In Singkawang, however, the Hakka dialect survived and thrived, making it the main language spoken in the public sphere, including by many non-Chinese residents. The city is known across Indonesia as the 'City of a Thousand Temples' in recognition of the hundreds of Chinese temples and house altars that are distributed across the 504-kilometre area of 'greater Singkawang'. These temples collectively honour hundreds of deities and spirits. Over the past two decades, since *Reformasi* (the reform era), the number and diversity of temples, altars, gods, and spirit-mediums have grown, along with the cultural revival of Chinese culture in Indonesia, adding to an already complex local religious landscape.

The majority of ethnic Chinese Indonesians in Singkawang practise what can be called Chinese religion, though there are also many practitioners of Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. In Hakka, as in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, folk practitioners typically employ the verbal phrase *pai sin* (Man. *bai shen*, 拜神), or 'worshipping the gods', in order to self-identify as someone who prays to a number of gods, often in smaller temples. *Pai sin/bai shen* is a useful category because it 'transcends the nominal dissection of Chinese religion into Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, since many of the gods worshipped are not confined in practical terms to these divisions'.<sup>21</sup> The structure of Chinese religion in Singkawang is very similar to the *shenism* of Singapore and Malaysia documented by Elliot and Lee,<sup>22</sup> in which practitioners pray at small temples and altars dedicated to local gods in a primarily instrumental

<sup>20</sup>This is not the case for the outer islands, where Hokkien and Teochew persisted as local dialects in Medan, Riau province, and Pontianak.

<sup>21</sup>Raymond L. M. Lee, 'Continuity and change in Chinese spirit-mediumship in urban Malaysia', *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde*, vol. 142, no. 2–3, 1986, p. 199.

<sup>22</sup>Alan J. A. Elliott, *Chinese spirit-medium cults in Singapore* (London: Athlone Press, 1955); Lee, 'Continuity and change', pp. 198–214.

way, asking for good health, happiness, luck, prosperity, and marking the bi-monthly and annual cycle of auspicious holidays.

Chinese religion was brought to West Kalimantan by the earliest migrants—Chinese miners who began arriving in the region in the middle of the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, West Kalimantan had dozens of Chinese mining collectives, known as *kongsi* (Man. 公司), which were going through a process of consolidation into larger federations.<sup>23</sup> Membership in these mining collectives had an aspect of ritual brotherhood, akin to that of secret societies, which involved oath-taking and initiation rites.<sup>24</sup> While often thought of primarily as economic units, each mining *kongsi* also had a temple with deities brought from China and religious affairs were not considered separable from business enterprises and the routines of daily life.<sup>25</sup> The ashes from the incense urn of a home temple in China were sometimes brought to West Kalimantan for the establishment of a new altar or temple, through a practice known as *fenxiang* (分香), or dividing the ashes,<sup>26</sup> and this practice still takes place within temple networks in Indonesia today. Additionally, seafarers and other sojourners brought Mazu (Man. 媽祖), the goddess of the sea, to West Kalimantan and other places in Southeast Asia, as her altar was a common protective feature of migrant ships from southern China. These altars were often dismantled and re-established in temples in coastal cities in Indonesia, particularly by Hokkien settlers and sojourners from the Fujian province.<sup>27</sup>

As newcomers to foreign lands in Southeast Asia, Chinese migrants also made efforts to respect and honour local gods, spirits, and places whose ontology exists within both indigenous and Chinese cosmology. Chinese settlers and sojourners built altars and temples in prominent natural locations, including at the sites of large or auspicious rocks, trees, caves, river mouths, mining sites, and mountains.<sup>28</sup> These natural features sometimes became personified and then deified over time, taking on the status of Dayak Datuk and Malay Datuk-Kong saints.<sup>29</sup> Worshipping these Datuk spirits is common in Chinese communities in the Malay world, including parts of Indonesia; and in certain urban centres in Malaysia, Datuk-Kong cults have considerable popular following.<sup>30</sup> When later waves of migrants from southeastern China began arriving, not

<sup>23</sup>Mary F. Somers Heidhues, *Goldiggers, farmers, and traders in the 'Chinese districts' of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2003); Bingling Yuan, *Chinese democracies: A study of the Kongsis of West Borneo (1776–1884)* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, Universiteit Leiden, 2000).

<sup>24</sup>Heidhues, *Goldiggers*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. Yew-Foong Hui, *Strangers at home: History and subjectivity among the Chinese communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 198.

<sup>26</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', pp. 198–214; Kristofer Marinus Schipper, *The cult of Pao-sheng Ta-ti and its spreading to Taiwan: A case study of Fen-Hsiang* (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Yuan, *Chinese democracies*.

<sup>27</sup>Johannes Widodo, 'Typological and morphological adaptations of Hakka diaspora's settlements in cosmopolitan Southeast Asia: West Kalimantan case', International Conference on Southeast Asian Hakka Studies, 2013.

<sup>28</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', pp. 198–214.

<sup>29</sup>Chew Hock Tong, 'The Datuk Kong Spirit Cult Movement in Penang: Being and belonging in multi-ethnic Malaysia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1992, pp. 381–404; Elena Chai, 'The veneration of Dayak Latok among Chinese in Singkawang, West Kalimantan', in *Transnational comparative studies on the Earth God belief* (Taiwan: Laureate Books, 2018), pp. 297–324.

<sup>30</sup>Daniel Goh, 'Chinese religion and the challenge of modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, hybridisation and transfiguration', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2009, pp. 107–137.



as miners, but as entrepreneurs, traders, and craftsman, they also brought with them a variety of other Taoist and Buddhist deities and sects, adding to the heterogeneity of the Chinese religious landscape in Southeast Asia.

In Singkawang, as in other Chinese enclaves in Malaysia and Singapore, there are now hundreds of small temples with gods that come from a mixed pantheon, combining influences from Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as well as local Datuk-Kong traditions.<sup>31</sup> Among this pantheon of gods, one of the most common gods is *pakkung* (Man. *bogong* 伯公; Hokkien *Peh Kong*), which refers to a class of divine beings that have locally defined, specific personalities. As Arthur Wolf has argued, 'god' (*shen*) in Chinese religion refers to the rank and role of a spirit rather than a being with a wholly distinct ontological status. Although people typically refer to *pakkung* using only this term, it is understood that every *pakkung* has a proper name, nickname, place of origin, or status title.<sup>32</sup> *Pakkung* are functionally equivalent to the locative divine beings known by various terms in Chinese communities elsewhere, such as *tudigong* and *dizhugong* (Man. 土地公 and 地主公), and are sometimes called 'earth gods'.<sup>33</sup> They are often described by practitioners as the spirits of long-deceased people, particularly pioneers,<sup>34</sup> who were especially powerful and virtuous while living and who have, on this basis, been assigned to protect the inhabitants of a specific locale, a role analogous in many ways to that of low-level magistrates in imperial China.<sup>35</sup> In Singkawang, people explain the position of *pakkung* using contemporary Indonesian bureaucratic terms, including *Rukun Tetangga* (neighbourhood head), *Camat* (sub-regent), and *Bupati* (regent), as well as *tuhan tanah* (host/landlord) and *tuhan rumah* (host/household head). The connection between *pakkung* and an imagined imperial bureaucracy is further strengthened by the fact that spirit-mediums, as the ritual specialists of Chinese religion,<sup>36</sup> typically don special costumes based on those of imperial magistrates or generals while possessed by *pakkung*, a pattern clearly visible during the Cap Go Meh procession.<sup>37</sup> However, since the fall of Suharto and the re-emergence of forms of Chinese cultural expression, there has been a proliferation of local Datuk gods, many of whom are identified as Dayak and Malay (local and indigenous), as opposed to imagined Chinese imperial origins. It is also not uncommon for spirit-mediums to be possessed by both *pakkung* and Datuk type spirits interchangeably. This engenders the practice with elements that are dynamic, multicultural, and multilingual, and have aspects that both territorialize and de/reterritorialize religion practice.

Based on quantitative data mapping I have determined that numerically Singkawang is, in fact, a 'the city of a thousand temples' or, more accurately, a city of

<sup>31</sup>Yew-Foong Hui, 'Strangers at home: History and subjectivity among the Chinese communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia', PhD thesis, Cornell University, 2007.

<sup>32</sup>Arthur P. Wolf, 'Gods, ghosts, and ancestors', in *Studies in Chinese society*, (ed.) Arthur P. Wolf (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), pp. 131–182.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. Lee, 'Continuity and change', p. 199. Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi, *The way that lives in the heart: Chinese popular religion and spirit-mediums in Penang, Malaysia* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 177.

<sup>34</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', p. 199; Hui, 'Strangers at home', p. 213.

<sup>35</sup>Wolf, 'Gods, ghosts, and ancestors', pp. 131–182.

<sup>36</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change'.

<sup>37</sup>Margaret Chan, 'Chinese New Year in West Kalimantan: Ritual theatre and political circus', *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 106–142.



a thousand altars. As of December 2021, there are 240 temples, and 1,058 house altars. There are 775 house altars with resident spirit-mediums, of which approximately 600 have specific altars for honouring and cultivating Datuk spirits, either Malay, Dayak, or of mixed ethnic origins. This quantitative data set communicates clearly the scale of the revival of Chinese religion in Indonesia and the density of forms of Chinese religiosity in Singkawang specifically. I have identified 90 transnationally recognized Chinese gods and 360 other deities without known transnational identities.

Chinese religion is characterized by openness and flexibility.<sup>38</sup> It is adaptable, inclusive, and capable of incorporating a wide range of gods, spirits, and folk practices from other religious traditions into a large and growing pantheon without generating internal theological contradictions.<sup>39</sup> At the root of this inclusivity is a pragmatic approach to worship; practitioners seek help in practical matters<sup>40</sup> and worship deities who are considered to have specific kinds of spiritual/instrumental power, such as sky/heaven gods or earth gods. Help may also be sought from a prominent figure such as *Guanyin* (Man. 觀音) or *Guangong* (Man. 關公), a transnational god such as Mazu or Fa Zhu Gong, a Datuk spirit, or even a sacred or magical object. The common feature among all of these is a form of intrinsic spiritual efficacy (Man. 靈ling) based on tradition, reputation, or manifestation. Permeating Chinese religion is the idea that gods exist within a vast yet unified polity that is both inclusive and hierarchical.<sup>41</sup> According to Feuchtwang's analysis, Chinese popular religion is built on 'an imperial metaphor, which stands in relation to the rest of its participants' lives, politics and historical events as the poetry of collective vision theatrically performed, built and painted in temples, carved and clothed in statues'.<sup>42</sup> This metaphor of a polity provides structure and authority to the cosmic realm that locals in Singkawang can draw from as a resource when they seek intervention in their lives.

As expert practitioners and ritual specialists, spirit-mediums in Singkawang act as gatekeepers, mediating access to the shadow infrastructure of Chinese religion in both its material and figurative dimensions. There are hundreds of spirit-mediums in Singkawang, most with their own altar, group of followers, and regular clientele. The cosmological basis of their mediumship conforms to the general logics of possession found in Chinese spirit-mediumship throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>43</sup> It includes the same basic structure and repertoires, methods of induction into trance, the giving of *phu* (talismans; Man. 符), the use of assistants/interpreters, the guarding of personal esoteric power and secrets,<sup>44</sup> and relational and illustrative narratives of moral superiority or moral fortitude.<sup>45</sup> In her historical review, Chan found that spirit-medium ritual practice strongly resembles the Min style spirit-mediumship of the

<sup>38</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', pp. 198–214.

<sup>39</sup>Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous response: Doing popular religion in contemporary China* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular religion in China: The imperial metaphor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>40</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', p. 199.

<sup>41</sup>Hui, 'Strangers at home', p. 201.

<sup>42</sup>Feuchtwang, *Popular religion*, p. vi.

<sup>43</sup>DeBernardi, *The way that lives in the heart*; Elliott, *Chinese spirit-medium cults*.

<sup>44</sup>Lee, 'Continuity and change', pp. 198–214.

<sup>45</sup>Philip Clart, 'Moral mediums: Spirit-writing and the cultural construction of Chinese spirit-mediumship', *Ethnologies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2003, pp. 153–189; Lee, 'Continuity and change', p. 204.

Fujian province that was brought to Taiwan and Southeast Asia.<sup>46</sup> In Singkawang, however, during the Suharto era mediumship developed in partial isolation from broader Chinese networks; it is practised by people with low levels of Mandarin literacy and few textual elements are included in the liturgy. The form of Chinese religion in Singkawang primarily consists of face-to-face temple rituals and spirit-medium consultations that take place in Hakka dialect or in Indonesian, depending on the possessing god. This oral tradition is accessible to non-literate and non-Mandarin-literate locals and, alongside the material religion provided by temples, altars, incense, and other ritual ephemera, exists as a shadow infrastructure of the state and secular structures of authority, with a distinct form of divine sovereignty that is spread throughout every corner of the city.

In imperial China, the figurative aspects of Chinese religion also acted as a shadow infrastructure,<sup>47</sup> with divine beings similarly referred to using an imperial bureaucratic metaphor.<sup>48</sup> Since the Han dynasty this *yin* world existed as a counterpart to the more visible and more physical *yang* infrastructure of the state. While both used common imperial idioms and the boundary between them was porous, a key difference was that the shadow infrastructure was under local control and acted as a key element in the self-governing structures of local society. With the end of the Chinese empire, the mutual mimicry of the visible (*yang*) and shadow (*yin*) infrastructures ended, but the *yin* world continued to exist in the shadows of the modern Chinese state. This is also true in Indonesia, despite an attempt to prohibit Chinese religion during the Suharto era. The case of Singkawang shows clearly how this transnational Chinese religious infrastructure has survived in the shadow of the Indonesian state, and now, once again, finds its place in the shadow of the rising global China. It is independent of the BRI projects and modern infrastructure development, and yet embodies the attractions, tensions, and circulations between visible and invisible Chinese worlds, of which the former are both also a part.

### Thinking about infrastructure

Until recently social science research has not explicitly focused on infrastructure, either methodologically or theoretically. This has, however, dramatically changed over the past two decades. Infrastructures are challenging to study because they are by nature complicated and have a dual nature, being simultaneously things that create the conditions of possibility for the operations of other things, as well as being the entire system of operation itself.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the word ‘infrastructure’ conjures up images of networks of physical things such as roads, cables, pipes, and vehicles, social scientists have traditionally defined their thematic jurisdiction as encompassing people, society, and culture, that is, the intangible aspects of human experience. Whilst few explicit studies of infrastructures were conducted before the 1990s, social sciences have always been driven by the study of complex systems involving dynamic relationships between multiple constituent parts. While social science is most commonly

<sup>46</sup> Chan, ‘Chinese New Year’, pp. 106–142.

<sup>47</sup> This could be imagined as the *yin* world or might even be called a *yin* infrastructure.

<sup>48</sup> Feuchtwang, *Popular religion*.

<sup>49</sup> B. Larkin, ‘The politics and poetics of infrastructure’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2013, pp. 327–343.

framed using methodological scales of analysis such as the family, village, social/ethnic group, nation, social movement, historical period, or cultural practice, the 'infrastructural turn' in the social sciences has rapidly produced a series of studies that place infrastructures at the centre of analyses that explore their sociotechnical, technological, historical, and semiotic dimensions. These studies have been useful because they allow for an understanding of the ways in which forms of knowledge and power are both built into and play out through infrastructural systems. This denaturalizing view of infrastructures shows how they are socially and symbolically constructed and perpetuated. The mutually constituting nature of physical, social, political, and symbolic aspects of infrastructures is laid bare and allows us to confront the conditions and affects that make infrastructure possible and reveal how infrastructures shape social life in much more than physical ways.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of infrastructure is useful because it describes both the material and organizational components that facilitate the operations of a process or entity. Religious infrastructure, therefore, includes physical sites like temples, mosques, and churches, as well as the institutions and systems of religious training, the organizational structures of religious communities, religious literatures, websites, online services, and other e-religion platforms. In this article, I propose the term 'shadow infrastructure' to describe the figurative aspect (metaphoric and symbolic) of religious infrastructure, in this case of Chinese religion. I show how it facilitates a process of identification by Chinese Indonesians in Singkawang which can deterritorialize an aspect of their sense of belonging from local contingencies, by giving them the means to imagine an immanent transnational polity. Significantly, this polity, while ethereal and omnipotent, has mythological roots in China, Chinese culture, history, and civilization. As experienced by a diaspora community in Indonesia it provides alternate images, ideas, and moral imaginaries about the self in relation to community, nation, gods, and the universe.

Long before the current BRI and Maritime Silk Road, locals in Singkawang have been meeting regularly in temples, in prayer, and via consultations mediated through spirit-mediums with the transnational gods of Chinese religion as well as other prominent immanent beings, such as Guanyin, Cikung, the four-faced Buddha, etc. Even during

<sup>50</sup>Many of these case studies elaborate and make sense of the impacts of infrastructural changes (Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita, 'Introduction: Infrastructural complications', in *Infrastructures and social complexity*, (eds) Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 19–40); infrastructure and economic development (Benno J. Ndulu, 'Infrastructure, regional integration and growth in Sub-Saharan Africa: Dealing with the disadvantages of geography and sovereign fragmentation', *Journal of African Economies*, vol. 15, suppl. 2, 2006, pp. 212–244; Elinor Ostrom, Larry Schroeder and Susan Wynne, 'Analyzing the performance of alternative institutional arrangements for sustaining rural infrastructure in developing countries', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 1993, pp. 11–45); and infrastructural failings (Stephen Graham, 'When infrastructures fail', in *Disrupted cities*, (ed.) Stephen Graham (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 13–38). Other theorizations seek to explain complex infrastructures, not in terms of the sense they make, but in terms of their inherent complexity and the ways in which infrastructures are involved in citizenship and governance (Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic city: Water and the infrastructures of citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); James Holston, 'Insurgent citizenship in an era of global urban peripheries', *City & Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 245–267), urban politics (Brian Larkin, *Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008)), nationalism, and inequality (Colin McFarlane, 'Infrastructure, interruption, and inequality: Urban life in the global south', *Disrupted cities*, (ed.) Graham, pp. 131–144).

the most repressive decades of the Suharto era, when these forms of Chinese religiosity were officially forbidden, this transcendental transnationally circulating cast of characters animated the movements and speech of spirit-mediums in house-altars and temples all around the city of Singkawang, providing regular active engagement with locals about morality, life advice, heroic tales, etc.

In his first year in power, President Suharto issued Presidential Instruction Number 14 of 1967, regarding Chinese religion, beliefs, and customs. This legislation unequivocally stated that religion, beliefs, and customs from China maintained by ethnically Chinese people in Indonesia were considered to have a *negative psychological, mental and moral effect on Indonesians* (my translation, emphasis added). The projection of culturally Chinese traditions as a hindrance to the process of assimilating Chinese Indonesians was used as a rationalization for their regulation by the Ministry of Religion and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Chinese religious worship and ritual practice, it stipulated, could not be performed in public and must be limited to private homes and families. This legislation, along with several other presidential instructions, formed the legal basis of the 32 years of cultural and religious repression that characterized the atmosphere for Chinese Indonesians during the Suharto era. When Abdurrahman Wahid became president in 1999, he swiftly retracted these laws and ushered in a new era marked by the expansion of cultural rights and freedoms.

While the ability to outwardly identify as a people who *pai shin* was officially restricted in the Indonesian context during that time, in reality, in the private spaces of the home and temples, the biographies of these gods and their interventions in the daily life of locals, through the giving of advice, prescriptions and moral lessons, charms and talismans, and ritual pronouncements, continued and has long constituted a shadow infrastructure—a transnational figurative religious infrastructure—existing beyond the reaches of the state. Having access to this, at times, secret and illicit world of gods and goddesses—and their moral fortitudes, their care and provisions, the structuring order they give to the universe and to daily life—have provided meaning and value to generations of Chinese people in Indonesia, particularly in Singkawang where a culture of religiosity is thick and especially important during times of repression or of societal uncertainty and upheaval. I call this a shadow infrastructure for three reasons. First, because it is largely hidden from public view. Secondly, because it is distinct from and operates separately from the structures of the state. And thirdly, because its sovereign power lies within a specific demarcated realm of affairs, which is neither mainstream nor mundane but rather esoteric and sacred. This shadow infrastructure is also not insignificant; it has the power to deal with many local peoples' specific needs in ways that state infrastructure cannot.

In the context of the Putian plain in Fujian province, Kenneth Dean and Zhenman Zheng found that village temples and ritual alliances constitute a second government 'which address certain local concerns more effectively than the state and its local government officials'.<sup>51</sup> Writing in the context of the revival of Chinese religion in post-Cultural Revolution Southeast China, Kenneth Dean argues that this second tier of government, a divine government, can provide services, raise funds, and mobilize

<sup>51</sup>Kenneth Dean, 'China's second government: Regional ritual systems in Southeast China', *Shehui, minzu yu wenhua zhanyan guoji yantaohui lunwenji*, 2003, pp. 77–109; Kenneth Dean and Zhenman Zheng, *Historical introduction to the return of the gods. Vol. 1: Ritual alliances of the Putian plain* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

communities into collective rituals, which are themselves at the centre of negotiating modernity in contemporary China. With the help of retired Party officials as committee members, during China's economic rise in the 1990s and 2000s many local temples were able to generate enough wealth to sponsor their own local infrastructure projects—paving roads, offering educational scholarships, and so on.<sup>52</sup> In this scenario, we see how the diverse pantheon of gods, both local and those worshipped nationally and transnationally as well as the alliances of temple networks through which communal rituals take place, can cross over from the realm of the figurative or symbolic to the realm of the material. The power of the symbolic religious infrastructure becomes capable of providing the organizational capacity and motivation needed to generate material infrastructures for the local community. The shadow infrastructure can have material consequences that effect the physical infrastructure of the state. Writing about the Nine Emperor Gods festival in Singapore, Jie Lin Chia argues that the divine sovereignty of the imperial gods offers an alternative to the imaginations of the state but also helps to elaborate peoples' understanding of the state and state power by providing a larger cosmological model.<sup>53</sup> In Singkawang, there are several material ways in which this shadow infrastructure interacts with the material infrastructure: the blessings and protection provided by gods, who are positioned as divine bureaucrats existing in authoritative roles with privileged granting abilities, are often imagined and cited as a cause of someone's material success. This success is often translated into investments in social and physical religious infrastructures, such as sponsoring Chinese temples, the building of the local Buddhist crematorium, the proposal for a religious university, and major and ongoing charity outreach work. In the case of FZK, introduced at the beginning of this article, all of the inspiration and directives for the temple's charitable activities come directly from Fa Zhu Gong through the medium Lu Ket Peng on a weekly basis.

Viewing Chinese religion as a multi-layered syncretic ritual field, Dean and Zheng argue that state officials and their scholar literati elites are not the only nor the most important agents of local social change and control; temples, cults, and communities of ritual practitioners also creatively adapt and mutate state ideas and institutions, and this often includes spirit-medium and spirit writing traditions.<sup>54</sup> I am making a similar argument by suggesting that for Chinese Indonesians in Singkawang, both the material and figurative infrastructure of Chinese religion provide a source of imaginative resources and practical formulations that can take care of individual and community daily needs in a way that local and state government as well as large international infrastructural development projects are not able to do. Imaginatively this comes in the form of people having a direct communicative link to the shadow infrastructure of the heavenly officials or celestial gods of Chinese religion, as well as a whole host of lower-level magistrates, warriors, heroes, and local officials (e.g. *pakkung*) who, when appealed to, can intervene in peoples' lives with moral guidance and practical remedies. For Chinese Indonesians who have had restrictions placed on their ability to identify as Chinese ethnically and to practise Chinese religion, and who have been

<sup>52</sup>Dean, 'China's second government', pp. 77–109.

<sup>53</sup>Jie Lin Chia, 'State regulations and divine oppositions: An ethnography of the Nine Emperor Gods festival in Singapore', *Religions*, vol. 11, no. 7, 2020, p. 330.

<sup>54</sup>Dean and Zheng, *Historical introduction to the Return of the Gods*.

excluded, until recently, from governmental and civil service sectors of society because of majority-minority politics and *Pribumi* (sons of the soil) nationalist politics of the mid-twentieth century,<sup>55</sup> this shadow infrastructure of Chinese deities and their power has been a boon, and has given Chinese Indonesians an internalized sense of security and sacred power.

While the local population may live in an area lacking advanced material infrastructures, they nonetheless have a well-developed religious infrastructure, with every neighbourhood having at least one *pakkung* temple, and usually multiple altars and temples, to pray at on the first and fifteenth of each month. The temples and altars are highly organized with ritual and social committees and networked via a series of religious umbrella organizations that coordinate annual rituals, god's birthday celebrations, Chinese New Year, and Cap Go Meh events, etc. These temples, as well as the Buddhist temples and the hundreds of spirit-medium house altars provide a physical religious infrastructure, just as the city's mosques and churches, leaders and congregations provide a material religious infrastructure for Muslims and Christians. In addition to these material infrastructures, however, Chinese religion in Singkawang also creates figurative and symbolic dimensions which allow practitioners to access the stories, symbols, biographies, myths, and concepts of Chinese Religion. Access to this shadow infrastructure of Chinese Religion, including a pantheon of transnational Chinese gods, can act as a force that deterritorializes people's sense of belonging and constructions of their ethnic identity. It helps provide extra-national resources for identity-making, particularly (and ironically) when those same 'Chinese' cultural resources were criminalized under assimilationist laws during the Suharto era. Paradoxically, something that is at once framed as a hindrance for national assimilation and recognition can simultaneously act as a source of strength, meaning, and recognition within the local ethnic and religious community.

### Chinese religious infrastructure in Singkawang

I want to return to the example of Liu Ket Peng and his FZK temple that I started to describe at the beginning of this article to exemplify the shadow infrastructure. Fa Zhu Gong is a well-known Minnan deity from Fujian province that was taken to Taiwan and other overseas Chinese communities. Known locally for being exceedingly powerful and having the ability to cure people from serious illnesses, followers often ask Fa Zhu Gong for medical help, as well as for prosperity, a better fate, blessings, and protections. The FZK temple is in a process of popularizing the worship of Fa Zhu Gong, and activating both a national and an international network.<sup>56</sup> Beginning in 2016, Liu Ket Peng and a group of followers travelled to China on a trip they described as religious tourism (*Indo. dharma wisata/ wisata religi*) to visit the origin place of Fa Zhu Gong in Shi Hu Dong temple in Fujian province. On this first visit, something

<sup>55</sup>Tabah Maryanah, 'Citizenship in everyday life: Exclusion of the Chinese Indonesians by non-Chinese Indonesians in Bandar Lampung-Indonesia', *KnE Social Sciences*, 2018, pp. 516–531; Susan Giblin, 'Civil society groups overcoming stereotypes? Chinese Indonesian civil society groups in post-Suharto Indonesia', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, pp. 353–368.

<sup>56</sup>Hertzman, 'An international turn'.





**Figure 1.** Liu Ket Peng under possession by Fa Zhu Gong, and blessing statues at Shi Hu Dong temple in Fujian, China, 2017–2019. Source: Emily Hertzman, reproduced with permission from the FZK Facebook page.

they describe as miraculous took place. Upon entering the altar, Liu Ket Peng, without planning, preparing, or inviting the god, was instantly possessed, surprising his followers and the local temple caretaker who was apparently unfamiliar with spirit-possession. Suddenly Liu Ket Peng jumped up and sat on the altar, while Fa Zhu Gong, speaking through him, announced that it had been hundreds of years since he had entered the body of a living human. In this great moment of possession, at his origin point in Fujian province, Fa Zhu Gong spoke to the congregants and told them that in order to strengthen the aura and atmosphere in Singkawang they must bring back ashes from the urn, and stones and water from a stream nearby. This important moment was captured on video by one of the congregants and is now prominently featured on the FZK temple's Facebook page (see [Figure 1](#)). Followers who witnessed this event, and those who were told the story, often speak about and remember this as a turning point for their group, and as a prominent manifestation of their leader's spiritual power as well as an essential validation of the strength and power of their deity.

Each year since then, members of FZK make an annual pilgrimage to this site just before Fa Zhu Gong's birthday. During the first and second year, approximately 20 people went on this trip; during the third year 30 people joined and they rented a bus to take them from place to place in Fujian province. In 2019, they brought dozens of statues of Fa Zhu Gong from Indonesia to be activated and blessed at the Shi Hu Dong Temple, which were then brought home and installed in members' homes. Those going on this annual pilgrimage describe themselves as religious tourists on a spiritual journey. For most it is their first time visiting China and provides an opportunity to get a glimpse of life in the country of their distant ancestors and to imagine possible (re)connections with China and Chinese culture, while performing the propitious act of tracing the origins of their patron deity.<sup>57</sup>

Fa Zhu Gong, like so many other Chinese deities, is a transnational god who was brought to Southeast Asia by sojourners as a kind of travelling religion.<sup>58</sup> While this community is just now re-establishing this connection with the Chinese origin place, there has always been a transnational dimension to this and other deities, imagined,

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Diana Wong and Peggy Levitt, 'Travelling faiths and migrant religions: The case of circulating models of da'wa among the Tablighi Jamaat and Foguangshan in Malaysia', *Global Networks*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, pp. 348–362.





Figure 2. Consultation with Liu Ket Peng's possessing gods, Singkawang, 2021. Source: Emily Hertzman.



Figure 3. Consultation with Liu Ket Peng's possessing gods, Singkawang, 2021. Source: Emily Hertzman.

as most are, as forming the higher echelons of an imperial bureaucracy in heaven that does not adhere to national borders. Members of the temple community interact with the god in the medium during night-time rituals of spirit-possession (see Figures 2 and 3). According to one temple member, Liu Ket Peng was once also visited by a local Datuk spirit, but after Fa Zhu Gong arrived, the Datuk spirit left and was never able to enter him again, suggesting an adherence to a concept of hierarchically arranged celestial and earth gods. When I enquired about this directly with Peng, he shook his head and denied that he ever had a Datuk spirit. However, later a neighbour living next

to the temple showed me where there used to be a Datuk altar which had to be moved to a cramped location behind the temple site after it was rebuilt in 2016 following a fire. Part of this process of removing these local elements and building the connection with China also represents a process of reasserting a geospatial hierarchy within the local Chinese religious context in Singkawang, which is currently characterized by a preponderance of local Datuk spirits of inter-ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Dayak identities.<sup>59</sup>

### Infrastructure and prosperity

The non-religious, urban infrastructures in Singkawang are relatively lacking in comparison with larger and more prosperous cities and countries. This infrastructural reality shapes people's perceptions of their own religious infrastructures, as well as their impressions of the Chinese-sponsored BRI infrastructural development projects nearby. Singkawang is a small city with limited urban and transportation infrastructures. There are constant water and electricity shortages which make it difficult for businesses and residents to function. The local economy is based on small family businesses run out of shop houses, with a small agricultural sector, and household income filtering in through rubber and oil palm plantations, chicken and pig farming as well as bird's nest cultivation. There are few industrial facilities and no finance or tech industries. There is no local public transportation system; the city is connected to other cities and villages by privately run buses and *angkot* (small shared vehicles) that are rapidly ageing and have almost been totally eclipsed by privately owned motorcycles and cars as well as locals using Grab and Gojek motorcycle taxi apps. There are limited post-secondary educational institutions. While a few technical colleges do operate, their courses are limited to economics, law, and specialized health programmes. Given this infrastructural dearth, the local government is constantly having to attract both public and private funding from domestic and foreign sources to develop and expand its basic infrastructures. The current mayor, Tjhia Chui Mie, like the previous two mayors, is trying to develop Singkawang into a religious tourism destination to showcase the city's harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, while simultaneously improving the urban and peri-urban infrastructures. The keystone of this plan is to encourage tourism during the large Cap Go Meh event which brings thousands of visitors and spectators into the city for a huge spirit-medium parade that marks the end of the two-week Chinese New Year holiday period.<sup>60</sup> However, most other religious events are also growing in scale and receiving government promotion, including Ramadan, Vaisak, Christmas, and Naik Dango.

There is a small group of wealthy Singkawang Chinese Indonesians, most of whom have moved to Jakarta or overseas, who take part in urban development initiatives by advising, supporting, and financing projects, including Singkawang's first and only mall, an international standard hotel, a Buddhist crematorium, and the city's first airport. These individuals serve on temple committees and are members of Chinese voluntary and hometown associations, helping to sponsor numerous religious events

<sup>59</sup>Chai, 'The veneration of Dayak Latok', pp. 297–324.

<sup>60</sup>Chan, 'Chinese New Year', pp. 106–142; Hertzman, 'Pulang Kampung'.

such as annual god and temple birthday celebrations. Even this elite, however, cannot compete with or play as equal partners alongside the China-backed infrastructural projects that are being developed throughout Indonesia, including in West Kalimantan. In Singkawang, this infrastructural development is represented most proximately by the PLTU (Pembangkit Listrik Tenaga Uap) power plant, which generates energy from steam. On 30 April 2011, a contract was signed by partners in Indonesia and China agreeing to the construction of PLTU which is located at Pasir Panjang beach, approximately 25 kilometres outside of the city of Singkawang. Eighty-five per cent of the financing comes from the Export-Import Bank of China, with the remaining 15 per cent owned by private and State Owned Enterprise shareholders in Indonesia. It was originally projected to take 33 months to build, but was delayed, although it is currently operational and supplying electricity to the local area in order to reduce the amount of energy imported from Malaysia. The project employed temporary Chinese migrant workers as well as Chinese engineers and skilled tradesmen who lived for several years in dormitories built on the site of the power plant. To give a sense of the scale and context, this project is one of 28 projects that Indonesia is proposing which collectively are valued at US\$91.1 billion as part of its inclusion in China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>61</sup>

One of the questions guiding my enquiry is: how do local Chinese Indonesians feel about this large capital investment and infrastructure development project? To be proud of, support, and identify with China, the BRI, and the Maritime Silk Road is, at least in part, to identify with the power, prosperity, and organizational capacity of that country. China has a vision, and is the developer and the financier of this vision. The country has transformed dramatically from a pre-industrial nation, suffering from widespread famine in the 1950s to a prosperous country that can be the giver (as opposed to the recipient) of aid, and can fund massive infrastructural development projects. These are precisely the things that the local community in Singkawang (and many parts of Indonesia) lack and it raises the spectre of comparing national development.

One of the culturally shared ideas that has been quite resilient in Chinese diasporic communities and in China alike is the notion of prosperity as a central (and often unproblematic) goal in life.<sup>62</sup> Many traditional proverbs talk about the importance and complicated nature of getting wealthy. An enormous amount of energy goes into the pursuit of prosperity at the individual, familial, and societal levels. The launching of the BRI marks a major global assertion of China's prosperity and is a characteristic of modern China that Chinese Indonesians in Singkawang frequently

<sup>61</sup>Riska Rahman, 'Billions on offer for Belt and Road', *Jakarta Post*, 20 March 2019; available at: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/03/20/billions-offer-belt-and-road.html>, [accessed 20 August 2024].

<sup>62</sup>Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin (eds), *Prosperity* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018).

remark on.<sup>63</sup> China's wealthy, modern, advanced society is something that my informants speak about in ways that reveal that these are things they respect, and would like to identify with, despite living in personal and social circumstances far removed from the possibility of prosperity on this scale. No longer the recipient of aid,<sup>64</sup> China is the provider of aid, whether via foreign direct investment, bilateral aid, or entire development banks like the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank. It is this version of China, as a prosperous economic player whose activities are making an impact through developing major infrastructures, that my informants align with. This valuation confirms the productive capacity not merely of these infrastructures themselves, but of the entire civilizational imaginary of China's Belt and Road and Maritime Silk Road initiatives.

There is an imagined aligning of identities when, for example, my informants in Singkawang speculate that China's success results from a disciplined work ethic that they too share, as descendants of Chinese immigrants. Or they speak proudly about the authoritarian style of governing in China compared with Indonesia, which they view as comparatively lackadaisical and also suffering from widespread and entrenched corruption. While, generally speaking, members of this diasporic Chinese community are impressed at China's rise, which they appraise according to a comparative developmental nationalism, there are multiple views and many critical voices as well. Some individuals are eager to align their cultural identity or index their shared racial or ethnic background with that of Han Chinese from mainland China as a way of identifying with the glories and success of modern China as a social historical force in the world today and a global economic superpower that can develop its own nation and now other nations as well. Other people are much more critical of China's authoritarian political structure and aggressive domestic and foreign policies and economic investments. These individuals prefer to differentiate themselves and preserve their own hybrid or hyphenated identities, as Singkawang Chinese Indonesians who are different and distinctive from mainland Chinese by virtue of culture, history, and nationality. The influence of the Indonesian sociality, based on a culture of polite decorum, specifically, has impacted on the way that Singkawang Chinese Indonesians perceive themselves in relation to groups of Chinese migrant workers, for example, making comparative statements about the latter's rudeness, directness, or lack of social graces.

In Indonesia, there is a small minority of extremely wealthy Chinese Indonesian elites in Jakarta and other big cities who have the financial capital organized into corporate structures and with the social and cultural capital to create business relationships with Chinese business people and investors. With the exception of two

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<sup>63</sup>Please note that the research for this article is based on a recent study of Chinese religiosity in Singkawang, but that I have been working in this community for over 10 years as an ethnographer and have engaged in hundreds of hours of formal and informal conversations with locals, many of which are spontaneous and unsolicited and therefore not recorded or transcribed. The generalizations about people's range of perspectives about China comes from the accumulation of these conversations, which are written and coded in field notes, as well as some more formal interviews.

<sup>64</sup>Clearly, development across China is uneven and there are many impoverished areas with lacking or ageing infrastructures. The perspective I am giving is that of China as a player in foreign direct investment internationally.

or three individuals, the Singkawang Chinese Indonesian community lacks both the wealth and the kinds of credentials and experience that would make partnerships in large-scale infrastructure investment projects, like PLTU, possible. This does not mean that there are not other kinds of transnational connections and networks.<sup>65</sup> So how can locals create connections with China without these characteristics and credentials? I suggest that the shadow infrastructure of Chinese religion creates a sustained connection which keeps this diasporic community symbolically connected with mainland China, as a group of people that prays to deities that are omnipotent, authoritative, transnational, and yet originate in China or derive from Chinese histories, myths, and literature.

Afung sits on a small red bench in front of his home altar, a fan in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. He breathes deeply and loudly, and rocks slightly from side to side and back and forth as his assistant, a young man wearing a black and red checked shirt with freshly cut and immaculately styled hair, hurries around him, cleaning off the table top, organizing stacks of papers, lighting candles, straightening incense sticks, and pouring coffee into small cups for the guests. Afung, who has just entered into a state of possession by one of his patron deities, Dewa Sigung, takes long drags from the cigarette and starts to speak in a low-pitched serious voice to the two men who are sitting adjacent to the altar.

‘Who are you? What do you want to ask? What’s your business?’ he asks directly, speaking in Hakka dialect.

The two men lean in curiously towards the medium in order to hear him more clearly, one speaking Indonesian and the other translating into Hakka, and begin to ask a series of questions:

‘Respected master, may we ask you where you live?’

‘I live on Pasi mountain,’ he replies.

‘What is it like up there?’ the men ask.

‘It is very busy.’<sup>66</sup> There is a dragon, a lion and a snake, whoever wants to come here, comes here. You can meditate up here. There is a cave. A big cave that is full of bats ... There is a small village half way up the mountain. It’s a village of masters<sup>67</sup> where the gods live. There is Pakkung, Datuk, everyone, all the gods live up here. All the people from Singakwang, the good people, the dead people, the people who have become *sifu* are up here. But it is mixed up here, there are others too. There are people who are not born in Singkawang. Even the footprint

<sup>65</sup>Hertzman, ‘An international turn’.

<sup>66</sup>He uses the Hakka word *nao* (Man. 热闹 *Rènao*; Indo. *ramai*) to indicate that the place is busy and lively in a positive sense. Chau, *Miraculous response*.

<sup>67</sup>He uses the term *sifu* in hakka (Man. 師傅 *Shīfū*) which is used frequently in Singkawang to refer to both spirit-mediums or gurus as well as their possessing gods, depending on who is speaking.

of Sam Po Kung<sup>68</sup> is up here on the mountain. He left it here. It can be seen even by people. It is imprinted into a stone.'

As he speaks, he takes big gulps of Bintang beer from a large bottle and uses a handful of gold and silver joss papers to wipe his wet face after each sip. The men are attentive to each word and nod encouragingly as he speaks.

'Wow, that's incredible,' the men reply.

'What about Lo Fung Pak?<sup>69</sup> Is he up there?'

'No. Lo Fung Pak is not there. I know where he is buried. He is buried in Mandor, but his grave is a secret I will never tell. He is buried with a golden sword. There are hundreds of graves with his name, but only I know which is the correct one.'

On this occasion, these two men had come to visit Afung, not for specific personal consultations, but rather to learn about Afung's possessing gods. In discussing this conversation with me afterwards they acknowledged their excitement that what they had expected, what is local legend, was confirmed: that Mount Pasi (a local mountain in Singkawang) is indeed a sacred place that is home to many gods, spirit entities, and magical animals, both local and translocal. This includes members of the imperial bureaucracy who account for the fortunes and blessings of neighbourhoods and households at the local level, such as Pakkung, as well as higher transnational sky order gods, and even deified heroes and Datuk spirits. The local landscape is imagined as a sacred space worthy of the gods, and this is part of a process of territorializing Chinese religion within the local community context. Whereas in the previous example, Liu Ket Peng had received a special sacred activation from a mountain in Fujian province and through divine instruction brought elements of that aura back to Singkawang, in the description given by Dewa Sigung through Afung, it is the sacredness of the local mountain that attracts all sorts of gods and divine creatures to reside or meditate there. Whereas Fa Zhu Gong is imagined as a transnational god of great power, Sigung is a local god who lives in a small village in kin-like relation to other celestial figures. While China constructs its own civilizational imaginary through the BRI, in Singkawang, the local Hakka Chinese Indonesian community creates its own global spatial civilizational imaginary. That imaginary is based on being a place of great esoteric and sacred power and diversity, characterized by tightly knit kin-relations and a propensity inherent in the landscape and the people of being surrounded by and capable of communicating with gods and spirits through mediums and dreams. This is a source of power, which can be drawn on when electrical power, political power, or other kinds of power may be lacking.

<sup>68</sup>Zheng He 鄭和 was a Chinese mariner and explorer who travelled to many places, including Indonesia, in the fifteenth century.

<sup>69</sup>Lo Fung Pak is the Hakka name for the locally famous founder of the Lanfang Republic, a confederacy of mining *kongsi* that rose to prominence between 1777 and 1884 in West Borneo.



## Conclusion

The Chinese Nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century presented a historical moment in which developments in mainland China explicitly spilled over and affected other places and diasporic Chinese communities. People with mixed or hyphenated identities were called upon, whether they wanted to or not, to position themselves, their transnational cultural identities and imaginaries in relation to China's internal politics and then foreign policy. In diasporic Chinese communities across Southeast Asia (and the world) we are now also seeing a process of re/de-Sinification in relation to China's rise and the infrastructural investments of the Belt and Road Initiative, but this is not an unproblematic or unambiguous process. Re/de-Sinification processes may involve acknowledging, promoting, and leveraging shared linguistic and cultural similarities or distinguishing, differentiating, or denying cultural affinities.<sup>70</sup> It is a messy, anxious, and often ambivalent process of cultural identity comparison, critique, and boundary-marking and transcending, and often the work of the imagination.

Throughout the distinct, yet turbulent politics and societal transformations of Indonesia and China over the twentieth century, which, in both places, have involved repressions and restrictions on forms of Chinese religiosity, it is remarkable that the ontology, the sovereignty, and the transnationality of Chinese deities has remained incredibly intact. In Singkawang, the Chinese cultural and religious revival that is currently taking place has aspects of both religious territorialization and deterritorialization. Through it locals acknowledge the existence, power, and efficacy of both highly localized gods and spirits, develop a cultural tradition of inter-ethnic spirit-medium practice, seek to internationalize their temple networks, and continue to learn about the biographies of transnational Chinese gods. Collectively, these activities create an elaborate and multi-layered religious infrastructure, which has both material and figurative aspects. I have identified the figurative aspects of this as a shadow infrastructure, which can be drawn on as a source of personal identification and strength in everyday life and times of uncertainty under conditions where local physical and visible infrastructures and governmental representation and leadership may be lacking.

As infrastructure projects are completed along the BRI and the MSR, such as the PLTU power plant in Singkawang, locals may feel proud of the prosperity of the nation of their ancestors and seek to align themselves symbolically with that origin, but ultimately are far removed from the practicalities of the grand civilizational imagining underpinning these infrastructural developments. While China places itself at the centre of an outwardly expanding and smoothly connected network of economic transactional flows, via the BRI, Singkawang remains geographically, economically, and socially peripheral. As an alternative mechanism of inclusion, locals draw from,

<sup>70</sup>Chang-Yau Hoon and Esther Kuntjara, 'The politics of Mandarin fever in contemporary Indonesia: Resinicization, economic impetus, and China's soft power', *Asian Survey*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2019, pp. 573–594; John R. Clammer, 'Overseas Chinese assimilation and resinicification: A Malaysian case study', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1975, pp. 9–23; Wang, 'Greater China', pp. 926–948; Charlotte Setijadi, "'A beautiful bridge': Chinese Indonesian associations, social capital and strategic identification in a new era of China-Indonesia relations', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 102, 2016, pp. 822–835.



and creatively and spontaneously produce, visions of their own—a local imaginary which relies on stories, visions, dreams, myths, and biographies from Chinese religion as it is practised in Singkawang. This constitutes a sacred and moral power distinguished from the other kinds of power and political authority derived and materialized within economic investments in large-scale infrastructural development projects. This shadow infrastructure is also distinct and sovereign from the Indonesian state bureaucracy, and capable of dealing directly with the spiritual and moral lives of individuals.

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